Parents, the Adolescent and Sex

THE PARENTS' ROLE

ISSUED BY THE N.Z. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

foreword

THIS PAMPHLET, and the others in this series, are designed to assist parents to educate their children in simple, straightforward terms about questions relating to sex, and to encourage in the younger generation a healthy, wholesome, and informed attitude towards this important subject.

The pamphlets have been prepared by a panel of persons in Auckland who saw the need for some authoritative publication to guide parents in the sex instruction of children, and they are published by the New Zealand Department of Health.

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Parents, the Adolescent and Sex

THE PARENTS' ROLE

Our sons and daughters will soon be men and women. Most of us have done our best to help them to develop, but their odd mixture of maturity and childishness makes us wonder at times whether our best has been good enough. Such doubts are often felt with regard to sex education.

What adolescents come to feel and know about sex will have a strong effect on their future happiness. Their knowledge will come from many sources: films, newspapers, radio, school friends and other influences beyond our control. Whether we teach them or not our children will learn many things about sex—and what they learn can so easily be wrong.

Accurate knowledge and healthy attitudes should be taught in the home. If we want our children to know what is right and to reject what is wrong, it is up to us to teach them. Sex education is too important to leave to chance.

Perhaps you have made a practice of discussing your children's sex problems with them. If so, this pamphlet and others in this series may prove useful for further discussions within the family circle.

If you have not had the habit of discussing these problems with your children you should not feel too badly about it. You are not alone. There are thousands of parents like you who have always had good intentions, but have never carried them out. Even with the best intentions some parents have trouble in building the frank relationships which are essential for teaching children what they should know about sex. As parents, we may know that a feeling of shame or prudery toward the discussion of our children's sex problems is wrong, but it is sometimes hard to correct wrong attitudes in ourselves. Unless we do so, however, it is hardly likely that our children will be any better.

If you want to improve your ability to give sex education you should start with the idea that the most valuable education is presented through the actual living of the best ideals of family life. The child builds his own attitudes mainly from the practical example of his parents. The first lessons on sex are taught without words.

The second step should be to see that our own knowledge is sou[illegible] so that the questions children ask can be answered with sincerity and confidence. This does not mean that one should begin immediately to give "man-to-man" talks or "motherly advice" to adolescents. Sex information is best given when children ask for it. If they are too shy to ask, tactful use can be made of the content of films, books or newspapers as an impersonal way of introducing the necessary knowledge.

Attitudes toward sex, like other moral characteristics, take a long time to develop. During adolescence, however, the child's growing interest in sex will make it possible for us to teach the essential knowledge in a short time.

As has been pointed out in pamphlet Number Two, information is needed in the pre-adolescent period, but at adolescence fuller and more detailed knowledge is needed. This is the time when the attitudes and knowledge established earlier should be used as the basis for teaching all the things about sex which will matter in the future.

You will probably find it a help to give your adolescent boy or girl a copy of the specially prepared pamphlet to read for himself. Having done this you should be prepared to discuss the knowledge and advice offered in these papers to make sure that it is understood.

The good personal relationships need to set the stage for such discussions require an understanding on our part of the marked changes, physical, social and mental which occur at adolescence.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

The main changes in physical development are related to the onset of puberty which usually occurs at some time between eleven and fifteen years with girls, and between thirteen and seventeen years with boys.

In general, adolescence begins for boys at about fourteen years of age, and for girls at about twelve or thirteen years. Clearly, however, there is wide scope for individual differences.

BOYS

In boys, one of the earliest signs of approaching puberty is an increase in the size of the penis and the appearance of pubic hair.

In early adolescence it is common for boys to have their first "wet-dream". Unless they are prepared for it, this experience may be quite a shock to them. Many boys have deep feelings of guilt, especially in later adolescence when they may learn to be ashamed of the pleasure experienced in dreams of a sexual nature. Parents should explain that

"nocturnal emissions", as they are called, are the result of the accumulation of semen due to the activity of the sex glands. It is wrong to associate feelings of guilt with such an occurrence. On the contrary we should encourage the boy to feel that such experiences are normal and a sign of approaching manhood.

When a boy is thoroughly tired and is sleeping heavily, an erection of the penis and discharge of semen may occur without his awareness of it. Unless he knows that most boys have similar experiences he may feel bewildered, ashamed or unduly worried. It is as well to observe a decent reticence about such happenings but at the same time it should be made clear that they are a normal part of growing up.

Parents are apt to worry if they think that a boy has the habit of masturbating, and feel that they should do something about it. The simple fact is that the great majority of healthy males masturbate at one time or another, and that although it is most active during adolescence it is by no means confined to that age period. It can be stated quite definitely that it has none of the evil effects which have so often been attributed to it. To quote a leading medical authority*: "When psychological damage results, this is due not to masturbation itself, but to the anxiety and guilt which the person experiences in consequence of his belief that he is doing himself harm. When he has no occasion to fear censure, there is neither anxiety, nor guilt, nor damage."

Between parent and child this is a matter which in most cases is best left alone. In any circumstances the important thing is to avoid adding to the feelings of inferiority or guilt with which the habit is usually associated. If the parent feels that he can, and should speak to the boy about it, he should try to encourage the attitude that it is a rather unimportant, childish habit which will be left behind in later life. The fact that there is no reason to fear any evil results should be stressed and this can be done without appearing to encourage the habit.

Sermonizing, or disapproval or disgust, suggested even indirectly, will do far more harm than saying nothing at all about it. If the boy comes to you for help or advice you should of course be sympathetic and understanding, while remaining somewhat impersonal and objective in your attitude to the problem itself.

GIRLS

In girls, the usual sequence of physical development is the rounding of the hips, development of the breasts and the appearance of pubic hair. Menstruation usually begins some time after the breasts have begun to grow larger, when pubic hair is well-developed.

Unfortunately some mothers have learned to regard menstruation with false martyrdom and so teach their daughters similar prejudices.

Menstruation should be welcomed as a sign of approaching maturity.

* Prof. D. Ewen Cameron in "Modern Practice in Psychological Medicine." London, 1949, p. 231.

The wise mother's attitude toward menstruation and child-birth helps her daughter to accept gladly her proper feminine role.

Although the monthly period does sometimes make some girls feel slightly "off colour" there is no real reason why their normal activities should be cramped in any way. Outdoor exercise and athletic sports can be enjoyed without ill effects and the daily bath or shower should be continued.

The girl should be taught how to cope with the practical details of personal hygiene. She should also understand how the blood supply in the wall of the womb is built up each month to nourish a fertilized egg and that if the egg is not fertilized this extra food supply passes out of the vagina.

PERSONAL APPEARANCE

In both sexes there is great increase in height and weight. Some children grow as much as seven inches taller in one year. Growth of the facial bones causes prominence of the nose and an elongated appearance to the face. Although we usually welcome the sudden increase in height and weight, we sometimes forget that adolescents are prone to worry about their appearance. Parents who make too many humorous remarks at their children's expense would be better advised to give them the reassurance they need.

Posture may be ungainly in the early stages of adolescence. Stooping and slouching is often caused by embarrassment over increased height. Girls may become round-shouldered in attempts to hide their more prominent breasts. Voice changes, pimples, increased appetites and the need to rest frequently (often mistaken by parents for laziness) may also cause discomfort to adolescents if parents are unsympathetic.

The occasional friendly joke on these matters does no harm, but ridicule which is too often designed "to put a child in his place" can be very hurtful to an adolescent. We should try to build up healthy self-confidence in our children. The wise parent is never quick to resent the over-confidence sometimes displayed by adolescents as they feel their ways towards social maturity.

SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

The social behaviour of adolescents is marked by a definite preference for friends of the same age. The younger adolescent tends to avoid the company of adults and it is a common complaint of parents that they see very little of their children at this age.

This is the time when hero worship is often evident. Boys and girls are inclined to form strong attachments for a child of the same sex and age, seeing each other every day and becoming upset when they are not able to go about together. An individual teacher or other adult may also be singled out as a superior being. This form of hero worship is rather more intense with girls than with boys. Such attachments should be regarded with tolerance as they are often a means of developing standards of judgment. Children usually pass quickly through this phase.

Sometimes parents will suffer by comparison with these supposed paragons in the eyes of adolescents. The usual result is that parents are condemned for being too "old-fashioned". This is particularly likely if we criticize the hero or heroine or oppose the attempt to gain more independence. Although we should not give the absolute freedom in choosing friends and in social life which some adolescents think they need, wise parents will permit an increasing independence in their children.

BOY-GIRL RELATIONSHIPS

In later adolescence, most girls tend to seek the company of older boys, although some continue to prefer friends of the same sex. The first year or so of this phase is marked typically by a succession of boy-friends. Adolescent romances often involve outings to the cinema, parties and dances, and may cause some disquiet in the minds of parents. If we have not tried to give our children sound knowledge and attitudes towards sex there may very well be need for alarm.

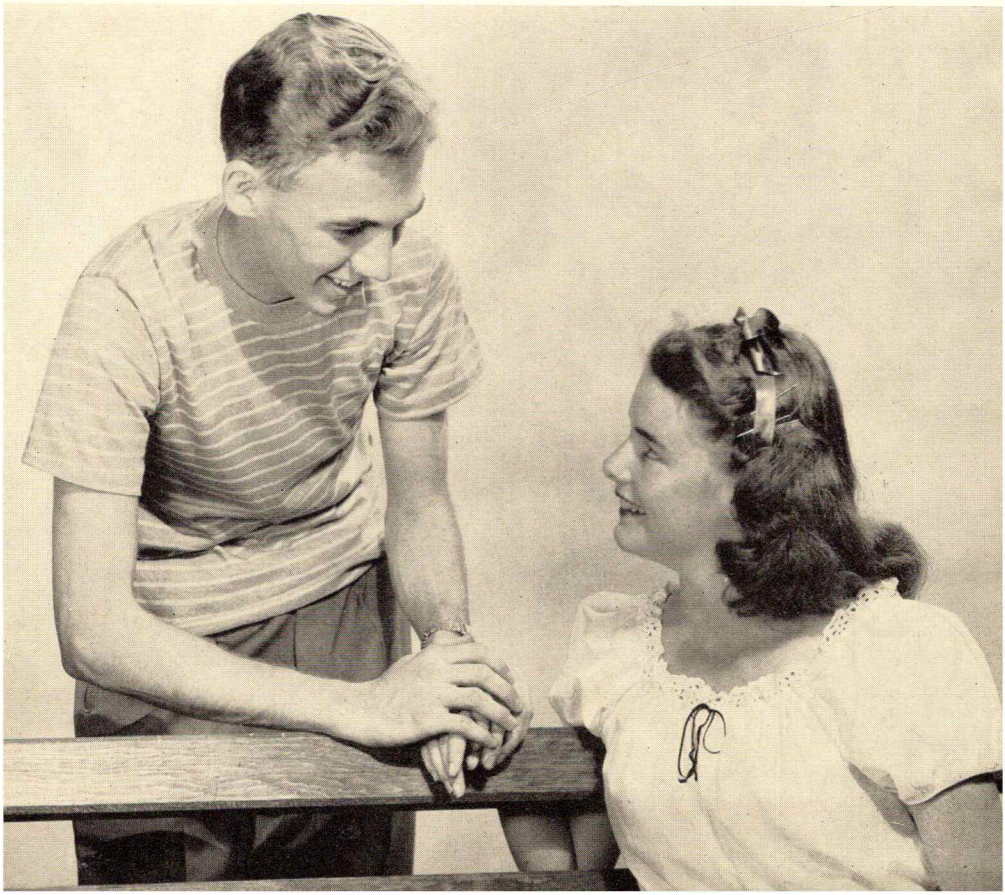
There are some practical problems here upon which adolescents need specific guidance. For example, a girl may be uncertain as to whether she should permit her boy-friend to kiss her. She will often feel that a refusal may cause her to be condemned as a prig and that as a result she may become unpopular. To the adolescent girl the disapproval of her own age group is typically of greater importance than that of her parents. It is worth while going to some trouble to give your daughter the idea that most boys will respect a girl who is friendly, yet poised and dignified.

This particular problem is part of the wider question of the physical expression of sexual feelings. The strength of sexual feeling varies in different individuals; in some adolescents sexual interests and drives are relatively easy to control. Most children meet this problem sooner or later, however, and they should know how to face it. The general principle, is that for young adolescents exploration of the physical side of sex must in the long run prove unsatisfactory and should be avoided. Repeated stimulation and tension without relief merely results in frustration which may have bad effects on the whole attitude toward life in general as well as toward sex.

In later adolescence sexual feelings and interest are very strong in most young people. They should understand that there is nothing morally

wrong in having sexual feelings. What is wrong is the notion that sex is too powerful to control. The duty of the parent is to see that his children are fully informed and, having done this, ultimately to trust to their intelligence and idealism.

It would be unreasonable, however, to expect too much too soon. The younger adolescent usually needs strong moral support in developing self-discipline. When our children are in the early adolescent phase we should find ways to supervise boy-girl relationships. Girls and boys should be encouraged to bring their friends home and to invite them on family outings. We can help by encouraging shared interests such as games, dancing or cultural activities which provide enjoyment and stimulate development. When they go out in the evenings, children should understand that their parents expect them home at a definite time and that it is in their own interests to return at a reasonable hour. Generally, however, as our children approach maturity it is *not* a good idea to show that we are too anxious to act as chaperones. When our children are fully informed and know that they are trusted, their conduct will usually justify our confidence.



MENTAL DEVELOPMENT

There are wide differences between children of the same age in the ability to understand and to learn. These differences are just as important as physical and social variations and they should be taken into account in our approach to sex education. For example, an appeal to reason and idealism may be effective with intelligent children, but with others this approach may need to be supported by careful supervision.

Occasionally we make the mistake of over-rating the mental maturity of adolescents, but we more often make the opposite error of under-rating their ability—especially in later adolescence. At this age the child's power of reason is practically as good as it ever will be. Although his experience is relatively thin, his capacity to understand and to learn is often equal to or greater than our own.

Sex education, therefore, should be given without "talking down" too much to what we take to be the adolescent level. As a general rule, it is through the teaching of the truth and trust in the intelligence of our children that we can best develop in them self-control and worthy attitudes.

All adolescents should learn the facts about venereal disease and of other unpleasant consequences, moral, financial, legal and physical, which may result from failure to control sexual desire. They should know too, that none of the commonly practised methods of contraception is absolutely safe. But the parent who projects into the child's mind feelings of anxiety and guilt about sex is taking the negative approach—an approach which makes it difficult for the child to enjoy sex in a civilized way at the proper time in marriage.

Although sex interest is usually heightened during adolescence, the development of other interests in vocational preparation, sport and other recreational pursuits should be deliberately encouraged in order to provide a balanced outlook. Sex interests should not be dominant at this or at any other stage in life.

At the same time we should remember that our children are soon to be men and women. It is our task to understand their problems and help them to develop the knowledge and wholesome attitudes which are needed in a happy and successful marriage.

Self reverence,
self knowledge,
and self control.

These three alone
lead life to sovereign power.

Titles in this series are:

SEX AND THE PARENT.
SEX AND THE YOUNG CHILD.
SEX, THE ADOLESCENT AND PARENT: THE PARENTS' ROLE.
SEX AND THE ADOLESCENT BOY.
SEX AND THE ADOLESCENT GIRL.

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